

# 300th Quarterly



**300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Special Edition 2013**

## Purple Heart Returns Home

The Purple Heart of Clarence Merriott returned home to Stilwell, Oklahoma on Veterans Day, November 11, 2013. We will let the following news reports tell the story which was recognized by the national and regional news media.

### Who if Pfc. Clarence Merriott, and why was his Purple Heart for sale? *By Chelsey J. Carter CNN November 11, 2013*

Mixed in with costume jewelry and trinkets was a gold and purple heart-shaped medal bearing the image of George Washington. A Purple Heart, Matthew Carlson thought to himself. But what was it doing at a swap meet in Glendale, Arizona, for just anyone to buy? "How much do you want for it," he asked. "Forty dollars," the vendor said. "I got \$20 on me right now," Carlson said. "I'll give it to you right now." At least, the Vietnam veteran told himself, he wouldn't have to "see it hanging on the shirt of some kid going to a rave party or something like that."

Who did it belong to? The answer was engraved on the back of the medal: "For Military Merit, Clarence M. Merriott." But that only spawned more questions: Who was he? How did he earn the medal? And how did it end up on a table of trinkets at the Glendale Park 'n Swap in January? As the nation honors the service of veterans on Monday, the journey of this particular Purple Heart will unite service members and families across decades. For each, it will serve as a reminder of service, sacrifice and loss.

### Searching for answers

Purple Hearts have been popping up for sale on the Internet and at flea markets in the past year, spurred by a 2012 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that overturned the Stolen Valor Act on the grounds of free speech. The act made it a crime to falsely claim high military honors. As a result, the ruling also lifted a ban on the

buying and selling of military decorations and medals. Among online collectors, the medals -- awarded to those killed or wounded in action -- can fetch anywhere between \$50 to \$500. The Pentagon does not release information about a service member or family members, citing privacy concerns.



So, for Carlson, tracking the medal's origins would be no easy task. The medal's blue presentation case with its gold lettering, bearing the words "Purple Heart," appeared to Carlson to be in fairly good condition. Inside the box, the lining was faded and the cloth hinge was ripped. But the medal itself was in decent shape. Carlson stored it in his bedroom for safekeeping while mulling how to go about finding Merriott or his family.

For months, the medal sat untouched in Carlson's suburban Phoenix home. But it was never far from his thoughts. The 59-year-old had served in the Navy during the Vietnam War. He, like so many, lost friends in the war. He knew what the medal meant to the families of the fallen. Surely, Merriott's medal must mean something to someone, he thought. But how to find out? "Do you know how to use the Internet to find things?" Carlson, a self-proclaimed computer illiterate, asked his son in late April. The answer, of course: Yes. He opened up the case to show his son, removing the medal from the box. For the first time, he noticed several pieces of paper folded tightly into the bottom of the box. One was the medal certificate, which indicated Merriott had been killed on June 19, 1944. (continued next page)

With a name and a date of death, an Internet search yielded a hit on a website honoring men of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion during World War II. Carlson and his son pieced together from the website that Merriott was one of 90 men killed when a landing ship -- LST 523 -- struck an underwater mine just off Utah Beach in Normandy, France.

But it was the other papers -- a two-page letter dated April 21, 1944 -- that offered the first tangible details about Merriott. "Dearest Mother, Dad & Sis," it began, "Truly hope you all are doing OK. As for myself, I'm just fine." Carlson read the letter, and then read it again. It didn't offer details about the war or where the soldier was deployed. Rather it was the kind of letter that Carlson says he wrote to his own family while he was away at war.

"This was a young man trying to keep his family at peace," Carlson said. In the letter, Merriott told his family how he missed the "warm, good spring sunshine." He asked after his mother, and he inquired whether his father had finished planting the corn crop. It had been sent to an address in Stilwell, Oklahoma. The Carlsons called a few people with the same last name in the area. Did they know where to find Merriott's family? The answer: No. Maybe the people behind the website knew more about Merriott, Carlson thought.

### **A call across the miles**

The message on Jan Ross and Brad Peters' voice mail was intriguing. It was from Carlson's son, who relayed the story of his father's find at the swap meet, how he found Merriott's name on their website and how his father wanted to give the medal to the man's family. Did they know anything more about the private first class? Would they speak with his father?

For nearly eight years, Ross and Peters had been detailing the stories of the men of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers on their website based in Erving, Massachusetts. It's a journey that began with a single question by Ross: What did my father do with the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers during the war? Her father didn't talk about the war very much. When he died two decades earlier, Ross was left with more questions than answers about his service. So she and her husband, Peters, turned to the Internet. Through the effort, she learned her father was a member of a four-man unit responsible for

making potable water under combat conditions. They had heard lots of stories over the years. But this story about the medal and Merriott was something different. Peters called the elder Carlson. No, Peters didn't know anything more about Merriott beyond what was on the website.

But maybe one of the surviving members of the 300<sup>th</sup> - - as they are known -- might know more. There was an upcoming gathering of the former combat engineers, Peters said. "Can you give it to the right people," Carlson asked? Carlson carefully packaged up the medal, the certificate and the letter, and sent it to Peters and Ross. In the package, he included a letter of his own: "Sometimes we tend to forget the past brothers in arms, I cannot. We must remember their service with all the dignity and respect we can muster. Pfc. Merriott gave his all for our country. Can we do less?"

### **Finding a name**

By the time the medal arrived in the mail, Peters and Ross had already been making inquiries about Merriott. They began by contacting some of the surviving members of the 300<sup>th</sup>. They knew at least two of the men attending the reunion had survived the sinking of the LST. Did they know Merriott? The answer was no. The couple knew one of the men was from the same area in Oklahoma -- Adair County -- where the letter was mailed. Did he know of Merriott or his family? Again, no.

Peters and Ross put the story about Merriott's medal in the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers newsletter, which eventually caught the attention of U.S. Rep. Markwayne Mullin. The congressman's grandfather, Kenneth "Cowboy" Morris, was a veteran of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers, having served with the battalion during World War II. Mullin and Morris, who were from Adair County, were intrigued by the story. Together, the two men began to look for answers. They soon found Merriott's name inscribed on the Adair County War Memorial in front of the county courthouse in Stilwell. They also turned to the Adair County Historical Society. With a population of about 4,000, Stilwell is the kind of place that's big enough to offer all the amenities of a city and just small enough for families to know of one another.

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### **Putting a face to a name**

Then someone remembered a scrapbook that had been donated a few years earlier. It had been compiled by a teenage girl, who collected newspaper clippings between 1943 and 1945 about the young men from the area who had gone off to war. Because of age and time, the scrapbook was in fragile condition. The staff at the historical society put it in a sealed archival box, where it sat unexamined. Perhaps it offered a clue.

The headline was brief: Missing In Action. The face of the man in the brittle, yellowed newspaper clipping was smiling. He wore a World War II-era Army dress uniform, with the hat cocked to one side. The article reported how the man had been missing since June 19, 1944. It revealed that he was born on December 21, 1922. How he graduated from Stilwell High School, where he was a "prominent in all school activities, including football."

It described how he joined the Army in February 1943. It said he was sent to Europe in December 1943, "spending his 21st birthday in England." "Let us all hope and pray that when the battles are all won in Germany, he will be liberated from an internment camp safe and sound thereby returning to his loved ones," the article said. The man in the article? Pfc. Clarence M. Merriott. Finally, the name on the medal had a face -- and a background.

Also in the scrapbook, a few pages later, the staff found another article: Merriott's death notice. Wanda Elliot at the historical society knew the name Merriott. There were a couple of families in the area with the last name. She called some of them. Do you know of the fallen soldier? Yes. He was a distant cousin. Did they know how to find any of the family? No. Elliott and others at the historical society then went to the Stilwell Democrat Journal, the local newspaper. But the newspaper archives were incomplete. A fire had destroyed some of the "war years" issues, including those from the summer of 1944.

### **A missing medal**

Elliott and the historical society staff turned to the Internet for help, searching online genealogical records. Merriott had a sister, Elliott and the staff discovered. But she had married and moved away even before her brother had joined the Army. The

group focused their search on Merriott's sister, Haleen. That turned up details about her son, and that led them to a listing of a possible grandson. A few telephone calls later, Elliott was on the phone with the grandson.

Elliott recounted to him the journey of the medal: how Carlson found it and wanted to return it to the family. It was in that call that Elliott learned that Merriott's sister ended up with the Purple Heart and that it eventually had been given to her son. Then a few years ago, the medal was lost in a move, the grandson told her. "They were very grateful it had been found, and they said that they would prefer it be placed in a museum," Elliott said. "They wanted people to appreciate the medal and the sacrifice it represented."

### **A medal's mettle**

Peters packed the Purple Heart carefully as he and his wife prepared to make their way last month for the reunion of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers. They planned to hand the medal over to Morris, who would take it to Stilwell and give it to the historical society. Peters had never held a Purple Heart in his hands. But he knew what it signified, the ultimate sacrifice of a soldier.

It was D-Day plus 13, and the landing ship was carrying the second wave of the more than 620 men who made up the battalion as well as the supplies they would need to do their job -- everything from blowing up bridges to making reconnaissance maps. A mine explosion ripped the ship in two, according to eyewitness accounts.

Like a number of those killed aboard the LST, Merriott's name was inscribed on the hallowed Tablets of the Missing at Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France, according to the American Battle Monuments Commission. None of the men at the reunion remembered Merriott. But that hardly mattered. "He was one of them, one of the 300th Engineers. Merriott and the medal were part of a much larger story, Peters said." "It was a very emotional moment for the people there." The Purple Heart was finally given to Morris, who took it back to Adair County.

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## **The journey home**

How the medal made its way from the Merriott family to a vendor hawking costume jewelry and trinkets remains a mystery. Merriott's medal will make one final journey on Monday, when it will be the centerpiece of a transfer ceremony hosted by Mullin. The medal will be formally presented to the county historical association. The ceremony will begin in front of the war memorial -- where Merriott's name is engraved among the fallen -- and then make its way to a case inside the historical society's museum.

Carlson has thought a lot about the fallen soldier as new details came to light. He plans to be there for the ceremony. So, too, will Elliott and Morris. All will honor a man they have never met but have come to know through the journey of a Purple Heart. (Congressman Mullin, Wanda Elliott and Jess Merriott attended the ceremony. Kenneth "Cowboy" Morris was unable to attend due to a fall.)

## **Channel 6 Tulsa, OK**

STILWELL, Oklahoma  
November 11 2013

An Oklahoma soldier, who was killed nearly 70 years ago, was honored Monday, as his Purple Heart was returned home. Clarence Merriott died in the English Channel in 1944, and his Purple Heart vanished over time. We went to Stilwell, where dozens of Oklahoma's Own paid tribute to Merriott's memory and welcomed the sacred medal back home.

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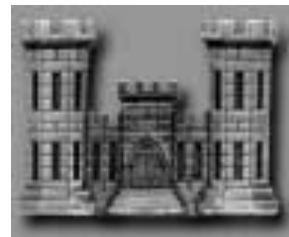
The box containing the Purple Heart awarded to Pfc. Clarence Merriott returned to Stilwell, escorted by Oklahoma veterans. "Growing up, he was just a name," said Jess Merriott. His second cousin was a member of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion in World War II. On June 19, 1944, the ship he was aboard hit a mine. Ninety soldiers died that day, including Clarence Merriott. "I didn't know him, but as I got older and saw the sacrifice that my dad and others who had served had made it, made me really think about a cousin that had given his life for our country," Jess said.

Clarence Merriott was posthumously awarded this Purple Heart, but his family lost track of it over the years and it disappeared, until this past winter, when Matthew Carlson discovered it at a flea market in Glendale, Arizona. "There's no way I could let it stay there," Carlson said.

Carlson paid \$20 for the medal and began to search for its rightful owner. Inside the box was a letter that provided clues and a personal touch: a soldier asking his "Dearest Mother and Father" about their latest corn crop. Signed "Always your loving son," Merriott wrote it on April 21, 1944, just 59 days before he died. When Carlson read the letter he knew he had to find the Merriott family. "You just can't stand still and see something that's not right without doing something to correct it," Carlson said.

On Monday, Stilwell honored its veterans and brought back the memory of a soldier who died a generation ago. Jess Merriott said the family is grateful that a determined stranger would do so much for a fellow soldier he never met. "It's just amazing. I hope that I would have done the same thing," he said.

Carlson said this Veterans Day ceremony was a fitting end for the long journey traveled by Merriott's Purple Heart. "He's finally got closure. He may not be home in body, but today, you felt his spirit in that auditorium. He's home," Carlson said.



**The Purple Heart of PFC Clarence Merriott**  
*By Angie Gallant, Grand Lakes News, Delaware County, Oklahoma*

The Purple Heart medal belonging to World War II Veteran and Stilwell resident Clarence Marcus Merriott, was transferred Monday, Nov. 11 to the Adair County Historical and Genealogical Association in a ceremony celebrating the service of all veterans and the bond of brotherhood they share.

The ceremony was held at Stilwell High School and attended by veterans, dignitaries and Congressman Markwayne Mullin (OK-2). But perhaps the most important person there was a Vietnam Veteran from Glendale, Arizona named Matthew Carlson. The ceremony might never have occurred without Matthew Carlson. "Matthew Carlson brought us all together today in eastern Oklahoma because he continues to honor that bond between soldiers who have been to war," observed Mullin, whose grandfather Kenneth "Cowboy" Morris served in the same combat brigade as the fallen soldier Merriott. Even though they didn't even serve in the same wars, Mr. Carlson knew the ultimate price a soldier paid to receive that Purple Heart and he wanted it to be treated with the dignity it deserved.

**Private First Class Clarence Merriott**

The Purple Heart recipient, PFC Clarence Merriott died in World War II, on June 19, 1944. Merriott was a member of the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers Headquarters and Service, commonly referred to as H&S, which was the administration, supply, operations, intelligence and reconnaissance arm of the battalion which served in Europe from June 1944 to May 1945.

A notice published in a local newspaper said Merriott volunteered for service when his country called, even though he had been offered a deferment. "He felt that to serve his country was the greatest thing he could do," the notice stated. The Stilwell High School graduate, who turned 21 while stationed in England, had written a letter to his family on April 21, 1944 asking about whether his father had the corn planted and longing for the warm sunshine of an eastern Oklahoma spring.

How different the weather was thousands of miles east of rural Adair County. Across the Atlantic Ocean and into a notoriously rough body of water separating

England from the rest of Europe, winds were causing difficult conditions for the soldiers preparing for a secondary wave of landings on the beaches of Normandy.

Crossing the English Channel on June 19, 1944, Landing Ship Tank (LST) 523 was full of equipment and men waiting to land on Utah Beach. Merriott and other members of the 300<sup>th</sup> Engineers were aboard LST 523. At the time of the tragedy, the ship was less than five miles off the coast of France when LST 523 struck a mine in the Channel waters. The mine's explosion pierced through the ship, lifting its center upwards and allowing water to rush in. Reports state that all of the people within those areas were thrown into the water through the holes ripped open from the blast or were killed outright in the force of the explosion. The broken ship sank and took with it many of its passengers rendered helpless or injured by the blast. Some survivors were picked up by other boats. In the end, many men, including Merriott, perished in the tragic explosion that day.

**U.S. Navy Operation Specialist First Class  
Matthew Carlson**

Matthew Carlson didn't finish high school. He had decided it really wasn't for him. But he met a Navy recruiter who changed the direction of his life. "To this day, I still remember his name," Carlson recalled. "He talked to me and said without a high school education you won't go anywhere." Carlson said the recruiter convinced him to get his GED and helped encourage and coach him through the process. The recruiter told Carlson that with a high school equivalency degree, he would get a better job in the Navy. The day after receiving his GED, Carlson signed his enlistment papers and that same year, 1972, was sent to Vietnam.

"I never looked back," he said of his old life, adding that the Navy straightened him out and gave him the discipline he needed to succeed. Carlson served aboard a guided missile destroyer that would cruise off the coasts of Vietnam and could target its big guns anywhere up to 10 miles inland. "There were times we were so close to the shore that (the enemy) could have fired on us with rifles," he said. "We were floating on the water, so we really didn't know where they were. But the enemy fired on us quite a few times."

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One day Carlson's ship had just finished a mission and was on its way toward open water to resupply. Suddenly the enemy began firing on them, blowing a hole in the deck. "That's when I lost two of my close friends," Carlson recalled. "And that's when I went from being an 18 year-old boy to a man." Medically discharged from the Navy, Carlson now lives in Arizona with his wife and family. Perusing different flea markets, Carlson keeps an eye out for military medals that are for sale. He buys them and often takes the medals to the area veteran's cemetery so they are, in some small way, returned to their "brother warriors," Carlson explained.

### **A Shared Bond**

The moment linking together the lives of Merriott and Carlson was inauspicious. In fact, it was just another trip to the flea market for Carlson. On that day, he spied a Purple Heart sitting in a vendor's glass display case. Carlson immediately recognized the significance of the medal.

"I said to myself, 'This isn't right. This doesn't belong at a flea market,'" Carlson recalled. He also worried about the prospect of the medal falling into a situation where it wouldn't receive the dignity it deserved. The price for the Purple Heart was \$40. Carlson said he offered the man \$20 cash and the deal was done. To Carlson, the price seemed far too small given the sacrifice he knew came with the medal.

At first Carlson didn't notice the paperwork inside the box, but eventually he opened it and saw Merriott's name engraved on the back of the medal. He also found two letters – one from the Army and the letter from Merriott to his family.

"The letter from the kid was the heartbreaker," Carlson recalled. "I got the sense when I read his letter that he (Merriott) was not only scared, but also that he did not want to show that fear to his parents. When you read the letter, as a fellow soldier, you understand it in the context of what was happening." Suddenly, the Vietnam Veteran found himself on a mission to return his soldier brother's medal to wherever it needed to go. That quest led Carlson and his son to the website of the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers. The site is maintained by Brad Peters and Jan Ross of Erving, Massachusetts. Ross's father was a member of the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers.

The website, [300thcombatengineersinwwii.com](http://300thcombatengineersinwwii.com), is home to many personal recollections, documentation and photographs about the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers. They were bridge and road builders so the tanks and trucks could push through. They laid and cleared minefields; they built or removed obstacles, ensured a safe water supply for troops and demolished what needed to be destroyed.

Carlson contacted Peters and mailed the medal to them so Peters could ensure it ended up in the right place. In mailing the medal, Carlson wrote a note stating, "Sometimes we tend to forget the past brothers in arms. I cannot. We must remember their service with all the dignity and respect we can muster. PFC Merriott gave his all for our country. Can we do less?" Kenneth "Cowboy" Morris and some of his family traveled in early October to Tyler, Texas where the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers held their annual reunion. There the Purple Heart belonging to Merriott was entrusted to Morris, on behalf of the Engineers, to be given to the Adair County Historical and Genealogical Association. Around the same time, relatives of Merriott were located in another state and they expressed their desire to have the medal displayed in the museum.

### **A Warm Welcome Home**

The medal's journey back to the last home Merriott knew before going off to war was celebrated Monday at Stilwell High School. Mullin is also a Stilwell High School graduate. In a nod to Carlson's role in finding the medal, members of the Vietnam Veterans/Legacy Veterans Motorcycle Club escorted the medal to the school from the Adair County Courthouse. Purple Heart recipients from across eastern Oklahoma escorted the medal into the ceremony itself. Stilwell students sang patriotic songs and played music. Oklahoma State Senator Wayne Shaw, Cherokee Deputy Chief Joe Crittenden and Stilwell School Board Member Jess Merriott also participated in the ceremony.

On behalf of the 300<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers, Mullin transferred the medal to the Historical & Genealogical Association. "It was a sincere honor and privilege to have been a part of this ceremony," said Mullin. "I know that his Purple Heart will be treated with dignity here in Stilwell and it will be on display so future generations can learn about his sacrifice for our nation."